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AUTHOR	Spoelman, Linda; Thomas, Katherine
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ABSTRACT

Although Caribbean (English) writers hold differing views on the effectiveness of making connections in an area of so much diversity, Caribbean literature can be connected to the English curriculum to promote diversity and understanding. V. S. Naipaul, Nobel Prize winning author from the region, presents a pessimistic view of Caribbean society in his novel "Guerrillas." Several Caribbean authors present the educational system as a force for disconnection, a colonial legacy that alienates people from their families and their islands. Caribbean writers speak directly to students from marginalized populations who find themselves pressured to adopt values at odds with those of home and community. Several women authors of the Caribbean see in the diversity of the region an opportunity for connection. One contribution of African women to issues of identity and connection in the Caribbean is the "obeah" woman who can curse and undo curses, the healer who can transform society. Caribbean women writers lay claim to this powerful woman and they present characters who hold society together, who heal the hurts, who embrace the known and unknown, the similar and the different. (RS)

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Linda Spoelman and Katherine Thomas

Southeast Community College

Cumberland, KY 40823

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October 11, 1996

Globalizing the English Curriculum

Through Caribbean Literature

The Caribbean is a crossroads, a point of connection between east and west, between north and south. There African and European, Amerindian and Asian have come together, often unwillingly, to forge an identity out of diversity. Our conference theme, "Reaching Out to Make Connections" could be the theme of Caribbean history. Most of those who initially came to these islands to "make connections" wanted to connect with the wealth the Caribbean offered--salt, mahogany, fertile land for sugar cane plantations, and rumors of gold. Later came the African slaves who were forced to sever ties to their homes, their tribes, their land, and forge new connections in a strange land. How did this small basin of islands--only 1900 miles from Barbados in the east to Belize in the west--come to be a crossroads of the world, a microcosm of so many crossings and connections in modern history?

It is generally accepted that the first people of the Caribbean were the peaceful Arawak Indians who may have migrated from the mainland of South America. The Arawaks were displaced by the Carib Indians who, unlike the peaceful Arawaks, were ruthless warriors and cannibals. A vestige of the connection the Caribs made with the English in the Caribbean shows up in our

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vocabulary: *cannibal, hurricane, canoe,* and *barbecue*. The Caribs fell before the conquering Europeans who were attracted to the region's mineral wealth, its rich land, and its strategic importance in warfare. While Spain was the first European nation to dominate and exploit the region, Holland, England, France, and Denmark were not far behind.

By far the largest group of settlers in the Caribbean came against their will. These were the African slaves who provided labor for the mines, the logging industry, and the sugar plantations. Today people of African descent dominate the population of the region. They share the islands with descendants of the original Amerindians and the Europeans who conquered them. They also share the islands with descendants of Hindus and Muslims from India who were imported for their merchant labor skills in the nineteenth century and with business people from Canada and the United States who have come more recently. Certainly this is an area where, historically, people have been forced to make connections. Our presentation will discuss Caribbean writers who hold differing points of view on the effectiveness of making connections in an area of so much diversity, it will examine the way Caribbean writers make connection between classical and African elements to forge a new mythopoesis, and it will suggest ways in which we can connect Caribbean literature to our college English curriculum to promote diversity and understanding.

There are those writers who find the connections made by the diverse population groups in the Caribbean to be weak and ineffective, inauthentic and impotent. V. S. Naipaul, Nobel prize winning author from the region, presents a pessimistic view of Caribbean society in his novel *Guerrillas*. He views the Caribbean as a place of empty rhetoric, a place without hope, a place unequipped for revolutionary struggle. Naipaul embodies defining characteristics of the Caribbean in the character of Jimmy, a person of indeterminate race and ancestry who, at the

whim of British journalists, is set up as a revolutionary back home in the Caribbean. Jimmy's home island, unnamed but patterned after Trinidad, faces the consequences of a colonial past: racial unrest, economic exploitation, crushing poverty, an ineffective ruling class, and a nearly non-functioning infrastructure. Jimmy has no achievements, no meaningful relationships, no sense of identity, and certainly no ability to lead anyone to economic or political well-being. From England Jimmy is directed to set up a sort of guerrilla training camp for adolescent boys. Not only is he unable to do anything productive with the boys; he himself exploits them. Jimmy impacts his society by destroying--he takes down the best of the island's youth as well as the worst, and he kills Jane, the shallow representative of an equally shallow English society. Basically all of Naipaul's characters in *Guerrillas* are cut off from each other, unable to make anything but violent connection.

The characters are also cut off from the land which has been destroyed through exploitation. . Rubbish dumps burn in remnants of mangrove swamps, bauxite dust pollutes the air, and heaps of junked vehicles clutter the roadsides. The river builds up a sand bar that leaves fish "stranded" (115) at low tide, apart from the life-giving sea. Vines break up concrete, and the weed-choked, cracked earth refuses to nourish the tomato plants Jimmy's boys set out. When nature abandons the fight in the Caribbean, there is little hope for victory, for the land has traditionally been one of the most powerful forces for connection and identity. Jimmy recognizes this when he develops a philosophy for his planned revolution: "All revolutions begin with the land...and men must claim their portion of the earth in brotherhood and harmony" (10). The garden of Jimmy's revolution produces only deformed eggplants and stunted okras, indicating the deformed and stunted nature of movements for revolutionary change in the Caribbean. Without successful revolution,

however, the barriers to human connection established by the colonial system will not come down. Most of the characters in the book want to get out of the island--as Naipaul did when he moved to England as a young man. Escape, Naipaul seems to be saying, is the only solution to diversity without productive connection.

Several Caribbean authors present the educational system as a force for disconnection, a colonial legacy that alienates people from their families and their islands. Orlando Patterson describes the pressure to break with family and place to pursue education through the character of Rosetta in *The Children of Sisyphus*. When Mary, Rosetta's mother, is determined to be unfit, the authorities decide that this bright child must be adopted out of the Dungle so that she can "achieve." The woman who comes to break the news to Mary says, "She has to make a clean break" (160). When Mary resists, two jeeps from the riot squad and a third vehicle bearing a police inspector arrive, suggesting the inherently violent nature of such a break for anyone who chooses to make it. Olive Senior also addresses this issue in her poem "Colonial Girls School" where she tells of students being culturally erased by the European curriculum of the school. At school, the girls find that "There was nothing left of ourselves / Nothing about us at all" (194).

College students from marginalized populations in the United States could echo Senior. Too often at school they find nothing about themselves, nothing about them at all. For example, most of our Appalachian college students have never read a novel or short story by an Appalachian writer. Most are unaware of the exploitation that still lies at the heart of our coal-based economy. Most have not addressed in any meaningful way the scarring of the land through mining, and most are unaware of the heroic resistance and sacrifice of miners earlier in the century as they fought for justice in the workplace.

When students from marginalized populations enter the academic world of the community college or university, they may find themselves pressured to adopt values at odds with those of home and community. As one student writes, "I come here to college and I'm one person, and I go home and I'm this other person that they knew, but not really. I think everybody is kind of wary and leery of me . . ." (qtd. in London 8). Laura I. Rendon, now an associate research professor at Arizona State University, moved form a bario in Laredo, Texas, into the world of higher education. She has this to say of her experiences as a Hispanic student in higher education: "To become academic success stories we must endure humiliation, reject old values and traditions, mistrust our experience and disconnect with our past" (62).

Many of our own students in Cumberland, Kentucky, report similar tensions. One young African American woman, the only person in her family or social group to complete high school, talked of the estrangement she experienced when she entered college and began serious studies. Being successful in college demanded a change in life style that affected her closest relationships. She would not go out with friends until her homework was done, she had no time for long phone conversations, and she began using vocabulary that the others could not understand. Her best friend eventually refused to speak to her. Finally she had to choose between her dream of becoming a nurse and her familiar world.

To students like these, Caribbean writers speak directly, expressing the pain of separation and the loss of cultural identity but also the possibility of resistance. Jamaica Kincaid tells of Annie John rewriting history with an unflattering caption under a picture of Columbus and of Lucy wanting to kill the daffodils that remind her of the conquering English. There is also the possibility of reclaiming the "erased" world of family and place. Olive Senior's poem ends with

"a brighter world before us now" (194). Our students need to know there are students like Annie John and the speaker in Olive Senior's poem who have resisted cultural assimilation and have integrated their past with academic success.

Several women authors of the Caribbean see in the diversity of the region an opportunity for connection. For example, Deborah Singh-Ramlochan's poem "One Tribe" envisions pale skinned, ebony, and copper toned women looking for answers to the same questions, experiencing the same pain and joy in life. She sees herself connected to all women and sustained by that connection when she writes:

ONE TRIBE

of the tribe
woman
pale skinned
long haired
or cropped short
darkly gleaming
ebony
copper tones
Beautiful
frail
strong
Woman
searching
questing
seeking forever
questions.
To which most find
there are no simple answers
Our emotions cut deep
Our hurt runs in rivers
Our love soars
Life...creases us with age
wrinkled memories
are sustained
in alert

twinkling eyes.
Never to be quenched
It is a heady
high feeling
just being
this woman
one unit
of the vast
tribe (134)

This connection is important for women, for it is from each other that women draw the strength to resist. And resistance has been essential to Caribbean peoples as they forge an identity in the context of colonial exploitation, racial diversity, and gender inequality.

One contribution of African women to issues of identity and connection in the Caribbean is the obeah woman who can curse and undo curses, the healer who can transform society. Caribbean women writers lay claim to this powerful woman as they present characters who hold society together, who heal the hurts, who embrace the known and the unknown, the similar and the different. One such character is Tituba in Maryse Conde's *I Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. Conde tells the life story of Tituba, the only woman of non-European descent to be accused of witchcraft in seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts. Conde decided to give voice to Tituba when she realized that Tituba's story was missing from the history books. With little historical information to work with, Conde presents a mock-epic heroine defined by her connections, both to her ancestors, to the people she loves, and to the land. Tituba is also connected to Conde: Conde experiences Tituba's spiritual presence in the writing process and mentions both conversations she has with Tituba and Tituba's editing work on the manuscript for the novel. It is this "strong solidarity" (199) with Tituba that impels Conde to redress the injustice of Tituba's

eclipse in history by giving her substance and voice.

Tituba, as Conde presents her, was born in Barbados, the product of the rape of an African slave by an English sailor. Already in her birth she expresses the violent and arbitrary connection that defined the colonial system. When her mother is hanged, she goes to live with a woman from the coast of Africa who communicates with the spirit world. She teaches Tituba to see the soul of every living thing and passes on to her the ability to connect to the invisible. But Tituba also makes many connections to the living in this world, particularly to the men in her life. As a young woman, Tituba falls in love with John Indian, half African and half Arawak Indian. She follows him into slavery and to New England where he abandons her and she falls victim to the religious intolerance of the times. Accused of practicing witchcraft, she is sent to jail. She survives imprisonment to fall in love with a Portuguese Jewish man whom she marries. He treats her well, so well that he gives her her freedom and sends her back home to Barbados. There she becomes a revolutionary leader and loves a young slave half her age. She dies by hanging, the result of a failed revolutionary plot. Tituba, thus, makes sexual and emotional connection with European, Amerindian, and African; taken as a whole, these relationships express the power and importance of love in overcoming barriers of age, race, culture, and gender.

Despite the suffering Tituba experiences in life, she remains a strong, powerful woman, a survivor, not a victim. She speaks in first person throughout the novel, inviting the twentieth-century reader to become intimate and to enter her life story, so that the reader can identify more clearly the racism, the injustice, the intolerance, and the disconnections that define his or her own life. Through her life story, Tituba challenges our students to examine their own cultural assumptions, to evaluate the reliability of the American historical record, to look with critical eyes

at contemporary American society, and to resist the forces for disconnection that they uncover.

Tituba describes her days as follows: "I got up at dawn, prayed, went down to bathe in the River Ormond, had a bite to eat, then spent my time on my explorations and healing.... I managed to mend open, festering wounds, to put pieces of bone back together again, and to tie up limbs" (156). Along with Tituba's healing, however, comes her passion for liberty: she participates in a revolution that costs her a lover, an unborn child, and her life . Speaking from beyond the grave in the epilogue to the book, Tituba reports pleasure in continued acts of healing and revolution. She finds strength for these activities in her island and her people. Whereas Naipaul sees an empty, barren landscape scarred by exploitation, Conde sees great beauty. Tituba is so closely connected to her island that, as she says, "We have become one and the same" (177). She knows past, present, and future; and, unlike Naipaul, she believes--indeed knows--that there will be an end to the suffering on her island. She communicates this to those who despair by whispering "Look at the splendor of our island. Soon it will all be ours" (178).

Hope, not despair, is the message of Tituba, the revolutionary and healer. As our students step into her life, they come to recognize the intolerance, the injustice, and the barriers between people in seventeenth century America and Barbados. More importantly, however, they see more clearly the intolerance, the injustice, and the barriers in their own late twentieth-century world. They know how Tituba responded to the world around her: healing, calling for change, forging connections. The question that remains is this: how will they write their life stories in a world that, at bottom, is not so different from Tituba's?

While Conde focuses on character to forge connection in an area of so much diversity, other writers turn to myth.

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